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READING THE ROMANCE: THROUGH THE EYES OF A MILLENNIAL FEMINIST

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READING THE ROMANCE: THROUGH THE EYES OF A MILLENNIAL FEMINIST

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Masters of Science in Communication

By

Jessica English

Spring 2017

THESIS OF JESSICA ENGLISH APPROVED BY

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Abstract

The consumption of romance novels is vast, far leading the literary industry, with millennial readers being the second largest consumer group. Similarly, we continue to see an ever-increasing embrace of feminist ideology, even if that does not always translate to self-identifying as feminists. This paper seeks to examine the interrelationship between these two popular parts of American culture, with particular regard to the millennial generation. This research is a quantitative analysis of participants that either identify as feminists or have, either in the past or currently, read romance novels, and their thoughts on the intersection of these two things. The survey involved 135 participants aged 18-29 primarily came from the Northwest area of the United States. The research found that overall, a majority of millennial consumers that identify as feminists also feel that romance novels do embody feminist ideals. Implications from the results of this research can be used to further examine the societal and social influences of feminist theory and its impact and influence on empowering modern day men and women.

Chapter One: Introduction

Personal Interest In The Subject

Feminism is not a new concept, we have seen its varying waves and their impact for decades. While the movements and our relationship with the label of feminism have been tumultuous at best, it continues to morph and impact our daily lives, whether we like it or not (Freedman, 2003). We've seen an increasing embrace of feminist ideologies, particularly in millennial women. The Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a survey in 2016 and found that 63% of women aged 18-34 identified as strong feminists. While the self-identification of feminism is a cause of debate and a focus of study within itself, it can not be denied that more and more men and women in America are in support of equality for all, regardless of gender (Freedman 2003).

Meanwhile, the consumption of romance novels and its sub-genres also continue to grow. Dating back farther than most imagine, romance fiction is other most popular literary genres on the market today — and that popularity shows no signs of waning. Despite this mass popularity, this genre is also consistently the object of criticism. Everything from the writing itself to the plot lines are often critiqued and criticized by both academics and everyday readers.

This intersection is especially interesting to me personally, because of my own history with both feminism and romance novels. I have long devoured books of all genres, but romance novels always stuck out to me as feeling especially interesting and enthralling, but also shameful and less intellectual than other books I was reading. It felt like I was cheating— like romance novels didn't count as much as other books. These conflicting feelings were something I struggled with, and I often hid my enjoyment of romance literature as a result. I still distinctly remember the first romance novel I ever bought and read— a Danielle Steele novel— as clearly as I remember falling in love with Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Yet, I only hid one of those books under stacks of papers, the others I proudly displayed and discussed as my budding interest in textual analysis began to take root.

Similarly, the older I got, the more I found myself being interested in feminist theory. I was fascinated to discover there was actual theory and controversy surrounding what I had long been lead to believe was simply common sense and respect. This mindset also seemingly conflicted, yet at the same time didn't, with my love of romance novels. It wasn't until I took classes on textual analysis and feminism that I realized this an was academic discussion that had been going on for decades.

Romance literature is the top-selling sector of the literature market, almost doubling sales of crime and mystery books and religious texts, the next two top selling genres. These books are consumed primarily by young, educated, women, yet there is still a stigma surrounding the consumption and enjoyment of them (Nielsen, 2015). Not only consumed primarily by women, they are also written by women, for women and about women, as well as published primarily by women. The publishing industry for these books is also predominately female— an astounding 74% (*Publisher's Weekly*, 2014, para. 1).

This relation between the demographics of both consumers creators is where the newer research emerges. Sarah Frantz Lyons, a literary scholar who specializes in the study of romance novels, notes that, “Women write and read romance heroes to examine, subvert, discuss, revel in, and reject patriarchal constructions of masculinity” (Pearse, 2015, para. 15).

So where exactly is the discrepancy? In a day and age where a large number of women consider themselves feminists, are they consuming romance novels? Or is there too much distance surrounding the genre to enjoy it? Or is it primarily women that don't consider themselves feminist that read this genre, resulting in the impression that these books and feminist theory do not go hand in hand? Examining the relationship behind the popularity of both

feminism and the consumption of romance novels will be a fundamental part of my research.

I hope to answer several questions— are romance novels and feminism mutually exclusive, or do they facilitate each other? Additionally, what drives the primarily female mass consumption of a media form that is so often seen as archaic and low brow, despite also seeing a cultural increase in acceptance of feminism? By analyzing the literature itself, as well as the readers, I hope to examine this interaction between feminist theory and romantic fiction and study the motivating factors behind the steady rise in popularity of both.

Terms

Cultural Consumption: According to a more complex theory about the interaction between producers and consumers, we are neither the passive victims portrayed by the 'critique of mass culture' school, nor are we the liberated consumers reported by many other authors. We are creative, active individuals, working with a range of cultural materials, and through a range of consumption practices, constructing and making sense of our everyday life (IGI Global, 2017).

Feminist Theory: The extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourse. It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality, and examines women's social roles, experiences, and interests.

Feminism: The advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men.

Genre: A categorization of materials, group based on similar subject matter.

Millennial: Individuals born between 1984-2004 (Howe, Strauss 2009). For my research purposes, defined as individuals currently between the age of 18 and 29.

Romance Novel: A novel with a central love story and an emotionally satisfying ending and optimistic conclusion (Romance Writers of America).

Romance Literature: A narration of the extraordinary exploits of heroes, often in exotic or mysterious settings. The term romance has also been used for stories of mysterious adventures, not necessarily of heroes. The primary focus is on the relationship and romantic love between two people, and must have an "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending."

3rd Wave Feminism: Feminism in modern day society, culturally less stigmatized than previous waves of feminism. Primarily focused on equality between sexes and minorities. (Tong, 2009).

Purpose

Romance literature has experienced great popularity over the years, resulting in over a billion dollars a year of revenue (Romance Writer's of America, 2013, para. 2). With an audience that is overwhelming female, young and digitally enabled, this genre holds a unique position that not many other literature genres do. This trend doesn't seem to be going anywhere, either, with the success of series such as *Twilight* and *50 Shades of Grey* continuing to break records, and spawn book-to-movie franchises of their own (Forbes, 2013).

So, how does the rapid consumption of romance novels juxtapose with our ever-changing attitudes toward feminism? The purpose of this research is to study and identify the attitudes surrounding both feminist ideals, and both the consumption and enjoyment of romance novels among millennial consumers, and to answer if both cultural phenomenas can be equally embraced without conflicting. The information will be evaluated via '3rd wave' feminist theory. The question this research seeks to answer is: how does the popularity of romance novels and the increase in feminism ideologies relate for millennial consumers?

People Effected

The scope of influence this phenomena has is immeasurable because it is impossible to survey the thoughts of feminist ideologies and the number of self-identifying feminists in the United States, in entirety at any age group. However, in general terms, it can be assumed that this research would primarily influence millennial romance readers, which account for 25% of overall romance novel readers (Neilsen, 2016). This research could also affect the 20% of Americans that identify as feminists, or the 82% of people that do not self-identity as feminists, but agree with feminist ideals, such as equality across genders (YouGov, 2013, para. 3). In a more specific sense, this research directly related to the 135 respondents I surveyed anonymously, which consisted of both men and women across the United States and their personal identification or lack there of as feminists, and their consumption of romance novels.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Methods

To find the relevant research on feminism and millennials, romance novel consumption and feminist theory in regards the reading of romance novels, searches including keywords such as “Feminism”, “Millennials”, “Romance Novels”, and “Feminist Theory”. These searches identified literature about individual subjects that were pertinent to my research, but little of the work that was found made correlations across these subjects. I refined my search to include the following words: “Romance Novels and Feminism”, “Millennial Feminists”, “Romance Novel Readers”, and “Millennials Reading Romances”. By utilizing these keywords, I was able to locate various sources that focused on the relationship among romance novel consumption, feminist theory and millennial consumers.

Romance Literature and Our Attitudes Surrounding It

Undoubtedly, the romance literature genre is flourishing with no signs of stopping. According to a paper by Margaret Haefner, “One out of five adults read a romance novel in 2006 (a total of 64.6 million Americans). Furthermore, romance readers are committed to their books; 46 percent had read six or more romance novels in

2006” (Heafner, 2008, pg 1). This vast consumption of books coincides with a general distaste for the genre itself— both academically and in everyday world.

This vast consumption of romance novels can be attributed to many things. Changing attitudes, embracing sexuality and technology are all undoubtedly factors. As society norms change and we collectively embrace— or reject— ideologies, it influences the literature we see as ‘acceptable’. Similarly, our societal feelings surrounding sex and shame also are influencing factors, as demonstrated through the decades. Perhaps most largely, technology also impacts our consumption of these novels. The change in accessibility of the novels, viral popularity of certain novels, the way we hear about them and thus consume them, and share our opinions of them all contribute to overall consumer habits surrounding romance literature.

An article on the pop culture website *Acculturated* addresses the sudden spike in recent history of popularity in romance novels. This text notes that since romance novels are not new, the sudden, continued increase in the past several decades in popularity must be attributed to something. It notes that the chemical reaction that women experience after reading romance novels is similar to what men experience after viewing pornography. (Wilcox, 2016). Even if

this is true, then, that still doesn't explain the recent increase in readership.

That increase, can, in part, be attributed to accessibility. Since publishers have both a wider platform to reach audiences and consumers have more ways to access a variation of romance books, more are consumed in general. Additionally, it's noted in the same article that the important role that advocacy has played for romance novels, such as that which has resulted from the formation of the RWA— the Romance Writer's of America. By advocating for and pushing romance novels, sales have increased. These three reasons are part of the massive increase in romance literature consumption.

When studying romance literature, it is virtually impossible to avoid discussing Janice Radway's frequently cited book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), whether it's in agreement or not. A true classic when studying feminist theory and literature, this book laid the groundwork for much of the research to following regarding this genre. This book discusses myths about why the romance genre continues to enthrall a largely female audience, despite continued criticism of the genre. Radway argues that we must analyze the act of reading itself in order to fully understand the consumption of this genre. She finds that people read romance novels both to protest and to

escape realities, yet also to make those realities seem appealing. Radway argues that the physical act of reading— carving out time for oneself, and thus rejecting responsibilities that one is committed to, is inherently a feminism act in and of itself. This complex relationship between the text and the act of reading is what Radway argues critics must address.

In another paper by Margaret Haefner, she notes that romance novels are indeed feminist works inherently, because they are stories about women, written by women, and for women to consume. She however also notes other areas where romance literature and research surrounding it often falls short— a lack of diversity in the texts, limited sampling in criticism about the genre, and an avoidance of truly challenging the patriarchy in the text (Haefner, 2009). However, despite those issues, the author finds the genre is indeed feminist, and she feels hopeful about the genre having a more positive place in society in the future.

Radway discusses the flux of her personal opinions on romance novels. She notes a moment when she realized some women viewed the reading of these books as an “declaration of independence” that defied the patriarchy, in part. She also emphasizes that it is important to differentiate the act of reading these books as a feminist act in and of itself, from the concept of feminist theory in the texts themselves. Meaning, Radway believes

that the feminist *act* of reading is an entirely separate argument from the content of the novels themselves.

Beyond just the popularity of romance novels, we must discuss the stigmas that surround them, and why. Maya Rodale, a literary scholar turned romance author herself, wrote a book on just that. *Dangerous Books for Girls: The Bad Reputation of Romance Novels Explained* (2015) identifies and explains the stigmas and attitudes that are associated with the romance genre.

As part of her research, Rodale conducted her own far reaching survey of romance readers, similar in content to my own. She found that, if there previously was any doubt, it's clear that romance novels have a bad reputation. Often found to be "Fluff reading, for not very bright individuals" or, "Unrealistic. Lesser quality writing and vocabulary" (Rodale, 2015, p 32). Indeed, Rodale herself notes that she agreed with these sentiments— before she started reading romance novels. A scholar who prides herself on her love of Proust and the like, Rodale began reading romance novels at the encouragement of her mother. She was skeptical, but ultimately found that she not only loved them, but wanted to write them herself. Now an author of romance novels, as well as a co-founder of a romance literature salon, Rodale also studies the stigmas and trends associated with romance literature.

She cites the discouraging attitudes toward this literature as reaching back as far as the 1800's. Taxes placed on windows for natural light, candles, printing, and the books themselves made it incredibly difficult for poor people or women to afford books, and if they were obtained, the idea of reading for enjoyment rather than knowledge was very much frowned upon. Yet, this did not discourage the demand for romance novels. Despite difficulties, she notes,

Fortunately, women did talk. And read.
And write. By creating stories with an
intense focus on a heroine— her
choices, her pleasure, her
independence, *and her rewards*—
romance novels promoted radical ideas of what
a woman could do with her life and inspired
women to try to make that dream a reality. Far
more than “silly novels by silly novelists”, these
books are perhaps some of the most
subversive literature ever written, distributed
and consumed (Rodale, 2015, p 19).

Rodale shows that, over the centuries, the deeply ingrained, casual sexism that women have experienced— consistently being seen as the lesser, more sensitive sex that does not— or is not suppose to— experience sexual pleasure, has led to both the playing down and unspoken disgust of romance novels and their subsequent enjoyment by readers. Even today, we see women struggle with the idea that their sexual pleasure, fantasies and desires should be owned, not hidden.

The more-complicated-than-males nature of female sexuality is also a factor. Inherently and collectively, we find female sexuality complicated, confusing and overwhelmingly misunderstood. As a result of this, we often downplay, disregard or reject the idea that it is equally important as that of our male counterparts. Females are no less sexual than males, they are simply different. This paradigm of sexuality is frightening to society, and thus we prefer to ignore it. Rodale also has an interesting theory about the common role in romance novels of the alpha male. She claims, "Another interpretation of romance novels with alpha heroes is that they are the patriarchy versus feminism writ small. The hero [or alpha male] is the embodiment of the patriarchy and the heroine is the embodiment of feminism and these two must figure out how to bring out the best in each other and find common ground in order to live happily ever after" (Rodale, 2015, p 123). This specific juxtaposition is not entirely unlike our real world realities. Women are so often viewed as lesser, with the patriarchy dominating over them constantly, that this power struggle, and eventually happy ending, is appealing to our desires to feel like we have equal weight in the world. It is a literary battle of the sexes— one that, in the case of romance fiction, women win, and that is inherently appealing to females, yet still a struggle to accept for some people.

Rodale addresses specific arguments against the idea of feminism and romance novels coexisting together. She quotes romance publisher Kensington's Editor Esi Sogah, who said, "I think the romance industry is feminist in terms of the ability it gives mainly women to run businesses, earn incomes, express themselves, explore all these things women were told not to think about too deeply" (Rodale, 2015, p 136).

Rodale also cites the simultaneous rise in popularity of both *50 Shades of Grey* and *Lean In*. How can two so dramatically different books brag such incredible popularity at the same time? Easily. We live in an age where women are told they can, and do, have it all. Which is both aspirational, and exhausting. There is something inherently appealing about the idea of someone being so dominating they make your decisions for you— after a long day, who doesn't want to just rely on someone else? These seemingly opposite books actually both reflect the feminist ideals that are taking deeper hold in our society— that women truly can have it all, whatever that means to them. Acknowledging, and embracing, your fantasies, whether you intend to act on them or not, is inherently a feminist ideal, at its core.

So why does this research matter? Why does it matter how we view and discuss romance novels? Arguably Rodale's most important finding is that she found that 89% of romance readers felt

people look down on them for their reading material, and 52% felt shame for reading romance novels. This deeply ingrained feeling of shame that we just *know* we should feel communicates something important. Since romance novels are so inherently female— by women, for women, about women— this shame shows that there is not just a distaste toward the books themselves, but a distaste toward women in general. Why else would we experience such feelings of chagrin at enjoying these novels?

Unless we continue to work toward dispelling those notions, and encourage the embrace of romance literature, we continue to perpetuate the idea that women are not worth being seen or heard. If we value the books, we inherently will value the women they are about, and who read them.

In a similar book titled *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance* (1992), author Jayne Krentz and contributing romance novel authors examined the stigmas and biases that surround both the writers and readers of this genre of literature. A collection of essays and analyzations, this book discusses the authors' takes on their own works and careers. The authors also address the idea that romance novels are all formulaic and archaic, and discuss their personal experiences with the genre as a result of those preconceived notions.

The contributing authors also discuss the positive aspects of romance novels— female empowerment, values and equality, as well as reader identification within the characters. This book provides an in interesting contribution to existing research because of its multitude of contributors that are authors of romance novels themselves. This text provides important insight into the stigmas that surround romance novels.

Feminism

In her book *Screen Tastes: Soap Operas to Satellite Dishes* (1997) author Charlotte Brunsdon, a feminist media scholar, addresses what she feels are the biggest, long-standing issues within the teaching of women's genres in all media forms. At its core, she notes, "Much early feminist media criticism involved a passionate repudiation of the pleasures of consumption which, by extension, morally rebuked those who consumed" (Brunsdon, 1997, p 172).

Brunsdon notes that in the 1970's we began to see a shift in images— from being *of* women, to being created *for* women. This shift included media being created that was both about women, and that women could identify with, or about female pleasure and desire. In 1984 Brunsdon cites the publication of the still very pertinent *Reading the Romance* by Janice Radway, which partially

inspired my own research. With this, we have continued to see an increase in women centric media being present in various forms of pedagogies.

When discussing the feminism of women's media, Brunsdon puts much emphasis on the consumer and the surrounding constructs of the text— what she notes as the 'engendering of the spectator'. Is the text constructing a feminine view for the reader, or is the reader already feminine? This cross-check is a crucial part of the conversation surrounding these various pieces of media, says Brunsdon. She cites Radway's work again as an example, noting that the latter's book is the most extensive scholarly look into the act of reading romances by 'the average woman' (Brunsdon, 1997, p 180). These exact constraints that appeal to many, can also be an issue. You cannot critique feminist media without discussing the idea of the 'ordinary woman', both as a subject and consumer. This idea of an 'ordinary woman' has, in the past, been inherently rejected by feminists. The ability to either identify with, or reject the concepts makes pedagogies of women's media difficult. This flexibility and fluidity is part of Radway's, and many other scholars, conflicts with feminism and romance novels. Quoting Ien Ang's review of Radway's work, Brunsdon summarizes,

“These are the theoretical terms in which Radway conceives the troubled relationship between feminism and romance reading. A common ground— the perceived sharing of the

experiential pains and cost of patriarchy— is analytically secured, but from a point of view that assumes the mutual exteriority of the two positions. The distribution of identities is clearcut: Radway, the researcher, is a feminist and *not* a romance fan, the Smithtown women, the researched, are romance readers and *not* feminists. From such a perspective, the political aim of the project becomes envisaged as one of bridging this profound separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Ang via Brunsdon, 1997, p 187-188).

Brunsdon goes on to note that Ang argued for research to attempt to overcome this opposition, and the pitting of one side against another, which could then result in a change in constructed identity. Ang’s desire was to “transform ‘ordinary women’ into feminists” and thus bridge both the gap between these identities, and thus the issues surrounding the pedagogies of the feminine (Brunsdon, 1997, p 188).

Addressing the same issues in a more modern context is Duggar’s article published in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* entitled “I’m A Feminist, But.” This article addresses one of the fundamental questions of the basis of my research— “What is the women’s studies critic to do when a genre dominated by women writers and readers appears to conflict with feminist ideals?” By exploring this juxtaposition, Duggar examines just that, in an educational environment. By looking at the teaching of popular romance fiction and feminism, Duggar ultimately finds that, while of

course this can not be true for *all* consumers of romance novels, the majority of readers are able to reconcile their seemingly conflicting ideals, and that teachers must reexamine the way they teach and consider romance fiction (Duggar 2014). By both being critical of and embracing romance novels, they can help shift the seemingly fundamental divide between feminism and romance literature.

Haefner's research did a textual analysis of romance novels studying exactly that crossroads of conflict (Haefner, 2009). Focusing specifically on the portrayal of the female main characters in romance novels, the positives and negatives, and resulting implications, are discussed surrounding those portrayals in regards to feminism. It's hard to nail down specifically how these portrayals come into play because there are so many different facets and viewpoints in feminist theory. One person's empowerment is another person's patriarchal issues, which means that, while some people see certain characters as inherently feminist, others do not.

The study breaks down feminist representations of women in romance novels, and discusses the varying levels of influence these criteria have in the books they analyzed. Unsurprisingly, it found that in some ways, the female characters in these books are empowered and can be seen as feminist icons, and in others, they continue to be subjected to patriarchal influence.

However, not all scholars agree with that viewpoint. Catherine Roach (2010), a gender studies scholar argues differently. Roach notes the massive popularity of the romance narrative in literature, arguing that it is, “sharing roots with Christianity and functioning as a mythic story about the meaning and purpose of life” (Roach, 2010, para. 7).

Roach says romance novels are popular because this type of narrative plays into the patriarchal archetype that we are familiar with, allowing readers to be consumed by a fantasy healing male-female relationships that we strive for. Romance novels help women readers understand and deal with relationships with men apart from the patriarchal constraints of real life. She says these books allow women to have it all, in a sense, unconstrained by patriarchal influence. This examination of the role that the patriarchy plays in romance novels and their consumption is an important part of my research regarding feminism, especially among the millennial generation.

As we move into modern conceptions of feminism and romance novels, it's important to address the changes the romance literature and criticism industry has undergone. In a brief article from the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, Jessica Matthews (2014) addresses the fundamental shifts and changes in feminism, romance novel consumption and societal mindsets since the initial

publication of *Reading the Romance*. Because of those changes, Matthews addresses the differences in romance literature studies that have resulted, and how mindsets would vary, as well as how research would be done differently if Radway had conducted her study and written her book today. Concerns about validity and population size would be essentially disbanded due to technology advancements, or at least far less concerning, and the inherent interconnectivity that technology creates would undoubtedly influence Radway's findings.

Another classic examination of why women enjoy what they enjoy is Rosalind Coward's book, *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought and Packaged* (1996). In this text, Coward examined the variation of advertised products that women like—and why. Coward claims women are victims of manipulation, hardwired to lust after things—the latest dress, or the latest way to be skinny. Achieving these things brings gratification, but only temporarily, until the next 'goal' comes along. This vicious cycle creates a constant sense of female dissatisfaction.

As Coward breaks down female desires, she specifically discusses the female attraction to fiction. She argues, "Fiction is a passionate pleasure in many women's lives, far more so than it appears to be for men. Women, it seems, are addicted to fiction" (Coward, 1984, p 175).

Coward goes on to explain the concept of the 'silent woman', whose thoughts, desires and feelings must be kept secret within oneself because of societal constraints. As a result of this concept, fiction geared toward women and about women is appealing because it allows the consumer to live outside those societal constraints. This appeal, coupled with the sexual revolution that took place in the 1970's, and its subsequent impacts, helps us to understand why romance novels hold continued appeal for women. *Romance Revisited* (1995) also seeks to examine why romance novels have so strongly stood the test of time. This book discusses the juxtaposition between decades of feminism and the role that romance continues to play in women's lives. It states that, "The trappings of classic romance—white weddings, love songs, Valentine's Day--are as commercially viable as ever" (Pearce, 1995, pg 6). This book is a collection of essays that analyze varying perspectives on romance and the role it plays in society. There are also contributions on romantic literature. This book strives to understand the role that the idea of romance plays in readers' lives.

Another classic in the discussion surrounding female-centric narratives is the book *Loving with A Vengeance* (2007). Modleski, the author, analyzes the frequent criticisms by feminism about female narratives, both in literature and television. She argues

against the idea that romance novels appeal to the idea of escapism and therefore, feminist masochism, and notes that it is elitist to condemn women for their actions in that way. She reiterates the argument that these types of fiction are, again, written by women, for women and about women, and therefore, appropriate for feminist consumption.

While the existing research surrounding the intersection of romance novels and feminism is plentiful, it's also, primarily, very dated. This is, in part, the motivation for conducting my own research— to help fill the gap. By doing so, we can help to not only further the literature industry, but continue to empower women through increased social acceptance and cultural consumption of feminist theory.

Chapter 3: Data

Methods and Rationale

In order to conduct my own research concerning the juxtaposition of feminism and romance novels, I used both a qualitative and quantitative approach to data collection. By building upon the existing research about feminism and romance literature, both current and historical, as well as conducting my own qualitative research, I hoped to gain a broad perspective on how romance literature and feminism intersect in today's world. I also set out with the intent to examine why these novels are so popular among women. I do this through a feminist lens.

Conducting a survey was the most effective way to gather the same information from a varying range of participants across the country, resulting in the most usable information with a wide sample range. It was the most effective method due to accessibility and ease of use, as well as anonymity for the survey takers. I created the survey based on feminist theory, and utilized the internet to gather data from friends and acquaintances from across the nation, as my research focuses on American women, in particular millennial aged 18-29. In total, 135 individuals, primarily from a university in the Northwest of the United States participated in the survey.

I gathered data on American women's interpretation of feminism and their perspective on romance novels, as well as how the two intersect, using both multiple choice questions and open ended questions. I used this data to support the existing research about romance literature and feminism. By using a confidential survey, it enabled me to gather wider spread data than in person surveys or focus groups would have. I also felt that surveys are less intimidating to participants, and required a smaller time commitment to partake in, so no incentive was needed to gather data.

Since my surveys were conducting online, participants were able to partake on their own time, in whatever setting they chose, without worrying about anonymity or judgement. This also allowed me to analyze the data at any time in my own schedule, as I had a permanent record online to go back to time and time again.

Data Analysis

My first questions analyzed the basics about my respondents. Age breakdown showed an equal variation of respondents spread out over the intervals I laid out— 18-20, 21-23, 24-26 and 27-29. This provided a good variation of respondents, all within the parameters I had set for who qualifies as a millennial. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of my respondents were female,

with only 10 of the total 135 being male. This breakdown is shown in the two bar graphs below.

1. What is your age?

10-20	21%	<div><div></div></div>	32
21-28	21%	<div><div></div></div>	28
29-35	30%	<div><div></div></div>	40
36-40	26%	<div><div></div></div>	36
Total respondents			136
Respondents who skipped this question			0

2. Are you male or female?

male	7%	<div><div></div></div>	10
female	93%	<div><div></div></div>	125
I prefer not to answer	0%	<div><div></div></div>	0
Total respondents			136
Respondents who skipped this question			0

The next question asked respondents how often, if at all, they read romance novels. The majority of people, 81 individuals, said once a year. The second largest answer was ‘never’, followed by once a month. A small portion of people said once a week, or 2-3 times a month. In retrospect, it probably would have been beneficial to allow an answer in between 2-3 times a month and once yearly, as that’s a fairly large jump, so it’s hard to determine where people would fall within that gap.

3. How often do you read romance novels?

once a week	4%	<div><div></div></div>	5
once a month	18%	<div><div></div></div>	17
2-3 times a month	5%	<div><div></div></div>	7
once a year	60%	<div><div></div></div>	61
never	13%	<div><div></div></div>	25
Total respondents			138
Respondents who skipped this question			0

The fourth question delved further into the consumption of romance novels, with the largest group of respondents, 64%, saying they read romance novels because they find them entertaining. 27% found them interesting, and 14% chose other, leaving an opened ended response. Individual responses frequently referred to things like ‘guilty pleasure’, reading out of boredom, or looking for a mindless distraction. Respondent 53 referred to them as ‘culturally educational’. Several respondents also referred to them as engaging in fantasies, with one (possibly male) respondent, number 102, noting that “[I read them because] my girlfriend likes them”. One especially insightful response from participant 129 notes, “I find them insightful into the different ways people communicate, react and engage in intimate conversation and relationships. But mostly they're just entertaining.” These opened ended responses provide valuable insight into why these individuals consume romance novels on, at least, a semi-regular basis.

4. Why do you enjoy romance novels?

I do not enjoy or read them	15%	<div><div></div></div>	24
I find them interesting	27%	<div><div></div></div>	35
I find them educational	3%	<div><div></div></div>	4
I find them entertaining	54%	<div><div></div></div>	84
Other, please specify	14%	<div><div></div></div>	16
Total respondents			132
Respondents who skipped this question			3

The fifth question discussed asked respondents if they were familiar with the concept of feminism, and then followed up with an sixth, opened ended question asking how they think of feminism or personally define it. 99% of respondents said they were familiar with the concept of feminism, with only two individuals saying they were not.

5. Are you familiar with the concept of feminism?

yes	99%	<div><div></div></div>	131
no	1%	<div><div></div></div>	2
Total respondents			133
Respondents who skipped this question			0

The responses to the opened ended question asking how individuals thought of feminism varied widely. The majority of people mentioned equality between the sexes, men and women, or some variation of a similar sentiment, such as respondent 9, who summarized that, "Feminism is equality for all. It is to support and

fight for women, men, minorities, LGBTQIA, the rights to healthcare, education and our planet. Feminism supports human rights and equality.” Another respondent, number 21, said that, “I define feminism as an ideological movement that pushes for the equal treatment of women in all aspects of society and culture, as well as the advancement of feminist thinking to improve upon life standards.” The words ‘empowerment’, ‘advocacy’ and ‘equality’ were frequently mentioned in many of the open ended responses. Other responses noted feelings of responsibility toward other women being a part of their ideals. Respondent 26 said, “The idea that women are entitled to equal rights as men, and that we as women have a responsibility to ensure that our feminism doesn’t leave behind people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, the disabled, etc.”

LGBTQ individuals, or other minorities, were frequently mentioned in the open ended responses as well. Respondent 135 mentioned, “Equality for both men and women, accepting all including people of color and LGBTQ+. Getting away from the concept femininity is weak or something males should not participate in. While also providing same opportunities that men get in the workplace etc.” Respondent 21 noted the principles behind the feminist movement as a part of their worldview, “I define feminism as an ideological movement that pushes for the equal treatment of women in all

aspects of society and culture, as well as the advancement of feminist thinking to improve upon life standards.”

Another individual, number 40, said, “I identify as an intersectional feminist, as it relates to the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and emancipation from related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination.”

Some responses included the discussion of romance novels, such as participant 7 who said, “Feminism is being a strong woman. Not all these women in romance novels are weak and pathetic. Some of them are strong women, just because a person, man or woman, wants romance and passionate sex, doesn't make them any less strong.”

Some responses reflected negative feelings about the concept of feminism, and its role in modern society. One respondent, number 19, said, “Feminism feels more like a fad or politicized statement these days rather than a true movement. I don't think it really means anything at all, other than that women want the right to kill their own children. Feminism should be a celebration of female power, in motherhood and in what we contribute to the world as a whole.” Another participant, number 45, felt that feminism was a contradiction, and said, “To me- feminism is a contradiction. A feminist is someone who says they want women to be equal to

men- yet expect men to still give women special treatment such as opening their doors and other acts of special treatment.”

These open ended responses give valuable insight into how millennials view feminism, particular in today’s society.

Following in a similar sentiment, the seventh question asked respondents if they considered themselves a feminist, giving the options of yes and no, as well as sort of and undecided. It also asked individuals to explain their answer, although only 30 respondents did so. 61% of respondents said they do consider themselves a feminist, with 24% saying they ‘sort of’ did. 10% said they do not, and 7% was undecided on the matter.

Some of the explanations of responses agreed whole heartedly with the movement. Survey user number 2 summarized by saying, “I consider myself to be a feminist because I believe in the equality of the sexes.” Similar sentiments were echoed often in this section by users. Participant number 9 said said, “YES YES YES. It goes against my conscious to NOT stand up for others and human rights.”

One individual, number 19, felt empowered by the idea of being a feminist, stating, “I consider myself the ultimate true feminist. I am a mother, a successful business owner, master of my domain, raising men.”

Other responses showed valuable awareness of the varying facets of feminism, particular in America. Respondent 26 noted, “I consider myself an intersectional feminist because I can see the inequalities in western culture, even ones my privilege shields me from.” Another, user 36, said that, “I am an intersectional feminist.” or a “post-modernist feminist” from respondent 64.

Unsurprisingly, some responses showed hesitation to agree with modern day labels, despite agreeing with the basic principles.

One individual, number 43, felt that,

“I believe in equality at home, in the workplace, bodily rights, etc., but the connotation of "feminist" is intimidating. Also, there are some areas/opinions that feminists may hold that I do not, such as the traditional role of a woman in a marriage. Not saying that I think women should be slaves to their husbands, but I do think there is a time and place for "Suzy Homemaker" and a nurturing, caring mother and wife.”

Another respondent, number 62, stated, “Men and women are not the same, equal rights yes but not every man is trying to oppress you. Feminism now I am not a supporter of.” One individual, respondent 69, felt like we’ve already made major strides in feminist ideals in modern society by saying, “I think the idea of feminism has been sort of skewed as of late. I believe in equal rights for men and women. I think we have made a ton of progress in that direction already.”

Another individual, number 93, echoed their distaste with modern day representations of feminism by saying, “I believe in the concept of it but don't necessarily promote it outloud like most feminist, id rather prove to the world that I believe that women can do anything through my actions. Such as being successful in a field not necessarily meant for women or that have a lot of women in them.”

One respondent, number 113, felt that their perceptions of feminism have changed within recent. “I wouldn't say I considered myself a feminist until it I realized it became an issue that couldn't be ignored.”

The variation in responses to this question gives us a broad range of insight into how millennial views on feminism— both historically and in modern society— fit into their world views and can help, or hinder, them personally. Additionally, the important inclusion of various sexual and cultural identities as a tenant of their feminist beliefs represent the important role that third wave feminism plays for millennials.

7. Do you consider yourself a feminist?

yes	81%	<div><div></div></div>	82
sort of	24%	<div><div></div></div>	33
no	10%	<div><div></div></div>	13
undecided	7%	<div><div></div></div>	9
Please explain your answer	22%	<div><div></div></div>	30
total respondents			138
Respondents who skipped this question			0

The eighth question in the survey discusses the relationship between romance novel consumption and feminism. It asks participants directly if they feel that romance novels embody the concepts of feminism, allowing users to select yes, no, undecided, or in some ways. It again asks users to explain their answer. Just over half of users, 52%, said that these books embody feminist ideals 'in some ways'. 31% said they do not, while only 4% said yes, they do. 12% of respondents were undecided. When examining the open ended responses, many individuals note the wide difference in romance novels as making it difficult to make one generalized answer.

One respondent, number 9, said, in some cases these books do embody feminism, particularly in the lead female character,

“There are many romance novels and actually embody what it is to be a woman. I love romance novels where the main character, the woman, talks about her lack of promiscuity because of the repercussions of society, only for her to finally say, "fuck the social norm I will do as I please." I like when the main character finally lets her sexuality and wants and needs be known.”

Another, participant 17, echoed the idea that it depends on the specific book, saying, “It depends on the novel - while some portray situations the exact opposite of feminism, I have read others that really build women up.”

Other respondents mentioned the inclusion of sex in romance novels as being an important element in the discussion about romance literature and feminism. Respondent 43 said, "I feel that most times, in romance novels, women are in control of their sexuality. Consensual, passionate sex is celebrated and encouraged. However, it seems like women are sometimes viewed as "less" than the male, specifically in regards to career choice. Women are often restaurant workers, authors, secretaries, etc., while men are CEOs and doctors."

Respondent number 40 was well aware of the subjective nature of an individual's feelings surrounding feminism, thus altering their view of romance novels, and noted so by saying,

"I do not personally think that romance novels embody feminism in any way shape or form. HOWEVER, the terms that define each person's feminism are subjective and some women who identify as feminists may find that romance novels DO in fact embody feminism. As long as the decision to align feminism with romance novels has been made with intention and as an informed consumer, then that's up to that person's free will, which is the feminist modus operandi."

Other respondents did not feel that romance novels embodied any feminist ideas. Participant 49 said, "More often, I think these novels portray women as incapable or objectified." Another, number 65, noted that sometimes specific storylines became an issue. "Often women are objectified in novels. But often

the story is told from the woman's perspective. Too often the female character seems weak and completely dependent on an abusive partner...hardly healthy!"

Other participants focused less on the content of the books themselves, and more on the act of reading them, an important facet of the discussion surrounding feminist and literature. These individuals cited the idea of choice as an important concept.

Respondent 71 said, "Whether or not to read romance novels is a persons choice." Participant 50 agreed, saying, "It depends what you're reading, but you're choosing to read it so there is choice in that."

One respondent, number 91, seemed to subconsciously reinforce the idea that romance novels are created by women, for women, about women by saying that, "Romance novels are definitely female based". This is important because, again, it shows a consideration of the act, rather than strictly the content of the novels.

8. Do you think that romance novels embody the concept of feminism?

yes	4%		6
no	31%		41
in some ways	52%		70
undecided	12%		16
Please explain your answer	43%		57
Total respondents			134
Respondents who skipped this question			1

The final question in my survey explored one last question about the correlation between feminism and romance novels, asking if readers felt that their personal views on feminism conflicted with their consumption of romance novels. 57% of respondents said they did not, while 12% said they felt they did conflict. 31% of respondents said 'in some ways' they did. This final question also asked for users to explain the answer, leaving an open ended option, which 30% of respondents participated in. One respondent, number 9, felt they had a personal responsibility to continue to shift the status quo when it comes to feminism and romance novels, saying that,

"I stated above that sometimes romance novels can be very empowering for the sexuality of women. However, I have never been introduced to a homosexual romance novel or even a novel where the individuals are of a different race. I believe that romance novels should dive into different relationships and situations... Romance does not mean "White man and white woman defy the odds and fall in love," yet sometimes I feel that is how they are depicted. I believe it is up to us to change how we view love & sexuality... Let's start writing books about the different types of romance!"

Several respondents discussed having feelings of 'guilt' surrounding their consumption of romance novels, a common theme seen throughout the research surrounding the subject. One participant, number 12, said, "Sometimes I will feel a little guilty for enjoying a novel that has a sappy predictable ended because it's

just like "ugh this is definitely not progressive but it's romantic!"

Another, number 14, noted that, "[reading romance novels] is a rare guilty pleasure, so most often not."

One respondent, number 55, noted that, in some cases, they struggle with their enjoyment of the books, "Because they are often entertaining (when they are well written, unlike a good portion of mainstream typical romance novels) and they can be enticing, but there's also some cognitive dissonance because I feel like I should not be getting enjoyment out of something that often portrays the female experience in such stereotypical ways."

A few respondents even mentioned hiding their consumption of romance novels as a result of those feelings of guilt, including participant 72, who said, "Yes. I've read the Twilight series and some of 50 Shades of Grey. I do feel like there is a conflict between feminism ideals and the story line of these novels. I wouldn't normally offer up the fact that I've read these books."

Another, participant 82, also mentioned opting to not share their reading habits with others by saying, "Yes sometimes. Sometimes I'm embarrassed and can't believe I've even read (Nicholas sparks) haha. I enjoy easy entertaining reads, but I'd love more novels with woman painted as intelligent and powerful, instead of always being reliant on the man for validation, saving, income, etc. We can make our own damn money! :)"

Several other respondents felt that the way they consumed these books mattered to them. One user, number 26, elaborated, saying, “As long as I'm not paying for content (i.e. Using a library) I feel comfortable engaging with media that doesn't necessarily conform to my world view.”

Others mentioned feelings that did conflict, but ultimately did not effect their consumption decisions. One individual, user 63, said, “At times. Like I mentioned, I love reading ones where the heroine breaks the mold, but I'm also a romantic at heart and every once in a while a girl likes to be swept off her feet.” Another participant, number 83, agreed, noting that, “As long as that's not your only source of literature I think it's perfectly healthy. It's fiction... and sometimes it's fun to daydream.” Participant 12 said, “Sometimes I will feel a little guilty for enjoying a novel that has a sappy predictable ended because it's just like "ugh this is definitely not progressive but it's romantic!"

Others had no issues with reading romance novels. Participant 68 said, “I like reading books from all perspectives! They are all entertaining, whether or not they align with my beliefs.” Another individual, respondent 71 said, “I believe that anyone should be able to read what they want, and not be judged for it.” One respondent, number 109, directly cited feminist ideals as their reasoning for not feeling conflicted, stating, “I'm doing what I want

and nobody- woman, man, etc.- is telling me otherwise. If they did, I'd tell them to deal with it. Isn't that the whole point of feminism?"

Ultimately, a common theme was prevalent throughout these open ended responses— that many millennials are considering their broader ideals when consuming romance novels, whether that was ultimately positive or negative, showing that individuals are taking part in being active consumers of this literature genre.

9. Do you feel that your views on feminism conflict with your consumption of romance novels?

yes	12%	<div><div></div></div>	16
no	57%	<div><div></div></div>	77
In some ways	31%	<div><div></div></div>	42
Please explain your answer	30%	<div><div></div></div>	40
Total respondents			136
Respondents who skipped this question			0

Findings and Discussion

In the responses to my research and survey questions, several themes and correlations came to light. The overriding themes of feelings of guilt or shame, advocacy for equality of the sexes, the concept of the freedom of choice, and the inclusion of sex and gender roles in romance novels were all frequently discussed in the open ended responses to my survey questions. I have created word clouds for both the individual survey questions with open ended responses and the entire data bank in order to demonstrate these themes within my own research.

As respondents discussed their personal consumption of romance novels in survey question 4, many cited feelings of guilt or shame associated with reading these books, which was unsurprising. These feelings are frequently discussed in the literature about the research of romance novels, so it was not unexpected to find similar sentiments in my own research. Other existing research about feminism and romance novels often show that these feelings are deeply ingrained in our subconscious, so much so that we understand we should feel ashamed of our reading habits without even being explicitly told to feel that way.

The majority of the responses gathered for this question demonstrated that concept, showing that existing research is still

relevant in many ways, despite changing societal mindsets and structures.

In addition to feelings of guilt, responses to question 4 also echoed the idea that romance novels are ‘mindless’, or vapid sources of entertainment. Despite a lack of explanation, or acknowledgment of plot lines and character development that many romance novels possess, most responders felt that these books were brainless, unintelligent or silly. These feelings are also echoed in the word cloud.



The next opened ended question, question six, discussed how respondents define feminism, personally. These responses carried several common themes. This was especially interesting to see emerge, since not all respondents personally identified as feminists, yet their definitions often aligned with the dictionary definition of feminism. Disagreement about the meaning of feminism is common in American society, especially among young people, yet my own research found that many associated the concept with issues like equality, rights and how the different genders are treated. As we can see from the word cloud, the common themes are very prevalent in this question.

Another interesting note is that the word 'men' was mentioned far more frequently than 'women' in response to this question, showing that even despite a discussion about feminism, our ideologies tend to be male-centric. The question is inherently about women, yet men are still mentioned more frequently and are at the center of the discussion, even with negative connotations. This is important to note because, despite consistent advancements in the attitudes surrounding feminism, it's far more difficult to shake a decades'-old male-centric creed.

The largest theme in this individual question though, by far, was the idea of 'rights'. Mentioned far more than any other issue in these responses, the idea of rights between sexes was prevalent

[illegible]

Question 7 asked participants if they considered themselves a feminist. 61% of respondents answered 'yes' to this question, and the resulting themes that emerged echoed that sentiment. After the inevitable mentions of women and feminism, the largest theme that emerged was the idea of belief, showing that respondents had both a personal tie and investment in how feminism effects their own selves.

Resulting sub-themes such as ‘consider’, ‘movement’ and ‘think’ show a consideration and informed decision surrounding their support, or lack thereof, of feminist ideologies. Other sub-themes such as ‘intersectional’, ‘everybody’ and ‘mother’ show an emphasis on the importance of inclusion for millennial feminists as well.



Question eight discussed if participants felt that romance novels embodied feminist ideals, and responses showed varying opinions. The responses to this question show that there is extensive situational sensitivity for most respondents when considering feminism and romance novels. Millennial opinions were not simply black and white— their opinions took into consideration all the other extenuating factors before passing judgement about if romance novels embodied feminist theory. Primarily, respondents felt like it depended on many factors if these books do embody feminism or not— author, content, characters, sex and how these things are portrayed all contributed to whether or not these books could be considered feminist works, on an individual basis, for readers.

This is surprising because most of the existing literature, and thus my assumed inferences, consider romance novels in a black and white manner, disregarding the idea that contexts vary within a genre and thus so also could the conclusions drawn about them. Very little existing research demonstrated the diversity within the romance literature genre, noting that some books may embrace feminist ideals, while others do not. Yet this idea is echoed in our own public assumption, and also demonstrated by the responses to this question. Many individuals cited specific romance novels, such

as *Twilight* or *50 Shades of Grey*, as explicit examples of books that they felt, did or did not embody feminism.

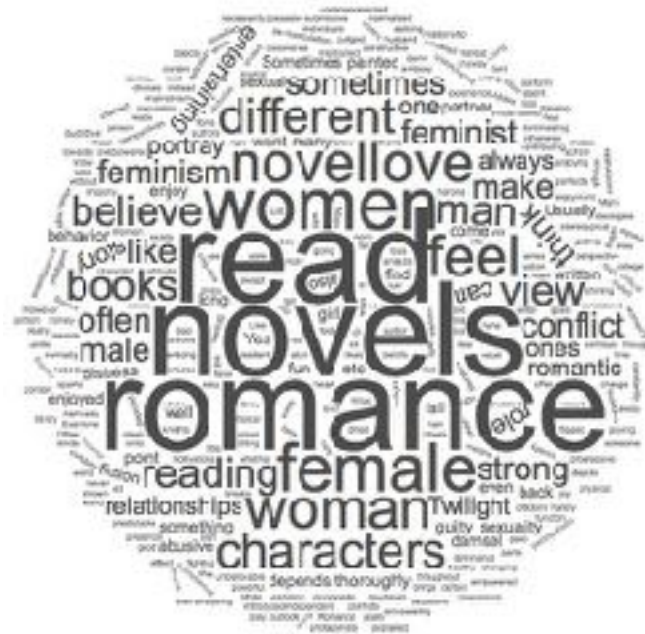
This data and its themes were surprising, because it shows a carefully considered consumption of these books by participants, rather than a blanket assumption or acceptance of them. It shows that, not only are individuals thinking about and considering what they're reading, but that they do consider feminism when consuming these books, which shows a sense of awareness I did not expect when beginning my research. This is something that existing research often glosses over, easily clumping romance novel consumption into a 'yes' or 'no' category, without considering the grey area in between, or individual consumer choices within a specific genre.



The final open ended question discussed if participants felt their personal views on feminism conflicted with their consumption of romance novels, if any. Unsurprisingly, many of the themes prevalent in this section of responses echoed those from the last question. The ideas of 'sometimes', 'different', 'feel', 'portray', 'often', and 'conflict' were prevalent, leading us to assume that, like the last question, it may very often depend on the content of the individual novel for readers to decide if they had conflicting feelings or not.

Additionally, specific novels, such as *Twilight* or Nicholas Sparks novels, were mentioned at length in this response section. Readers, like respondent 52 who said, "Twilight was weird and I wasn't into th[e] predator prey relationship it romanticized and normalized" used specific examples of romance novels they were familiar with to demonstrate the conflict they felt on a situational basis.

Again, this situational consciousness on the part of consumers was something I did not expect in my research, and shows that readers are aware of the often prevalent links between feminism and romance novels. This level of awareness in cultural consumption is, again, something often overlooked by existing research.



In addition to individual themes based on specific questions, I also analyzed the themes that emerged from my survey responses as a whole. This allows for a more complete spectrum perspective of my research. The overall themes presented in this study echoed several of the individual questions as well.

The largest theme that emerged from this research was the idea of 'rights' being a central part of the conversation surrounding feminism and romance novels. The way these novels impact our rights, the feminist concerns and impacts surrounding rights and how the two intersect were instrumental concerns for the survey participants on a multitude of levels. This theme shows that an individualist perspective is common in millennials and is continuously an important part of their world views. Meaning,

millennials value the degree to which something impacts their individual freedom and person as a deciding factor in their overall opinion.

Surprisingly, the second largest theme that emerged overall was 'men'. 'Man' and 'male' were also mentioned frequently. This was shocking to me for several reasons. Primarily, the majority of my survey respondents, 93%, were female, yet the conversation, be it negative or positive, was still centered around males. These individuals view feminism and romance novels through a lens that places men at the center of it. While in some ways this could be construed as expected, since feminism is in part about how men influence and effect women, it is also shocking in the sense that, despite everything, men are still at the center of the framework through which we view and understand the power dynamic between genders in society.

Other important themes that emerged were the ideas of 'believe', 'movement', and 'read', which are, interestingly enough, all verbs. These themes demonstrate a sense of active participation in these ideas, echoing Janice Radway's idea that the very act of reading romances itself is inherently a feminist act, and ideal. This correlation shows that millennials in particular take a very active role in their creative consumption and involvement of societal constructs and obligations.

Lastly, the theme of 'women' themselves was prevalent, showing that while less so than a male-centric view, the inclusion of females was also an important part of the conversation surrounding this research. I was surprised by how much less frequently women were mentioned than men considering that, in addition to the majority of respondents being female, romance novels are, of course, very female-centric, making the conversation about women within romance novels unavoidable. This divide again shows the entrenched and engrained ideologies that patriarchy has created within our world perspectives.

Overall, studying the most common themes within my research provided valuable insight into millennial perspectives of romance novels that I could not have otherwise gleaned from my research and the responses alone. By providing a subtextual analysis of the data, I am able to better understand how millennial feminists view romance literature.



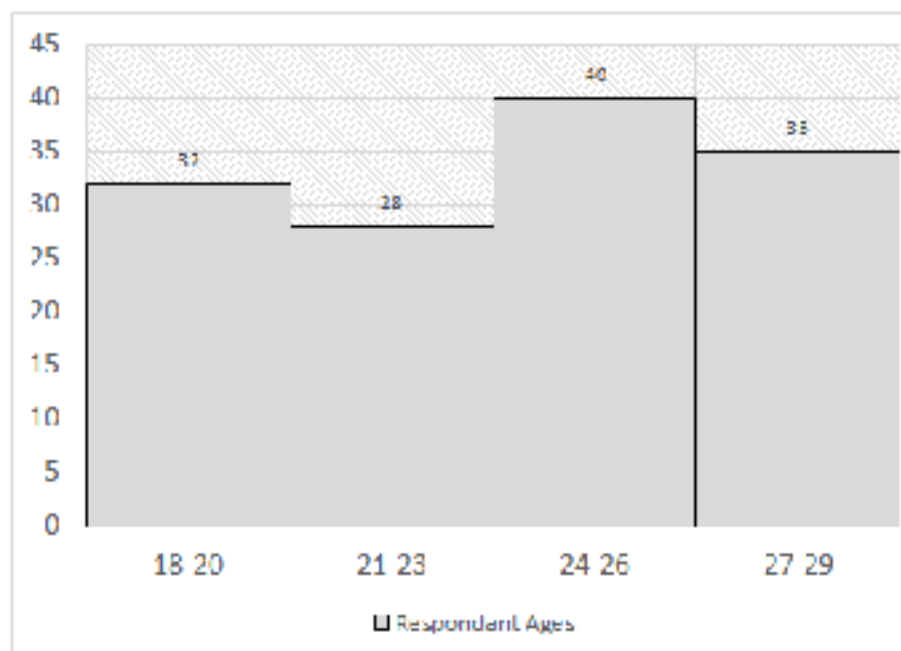
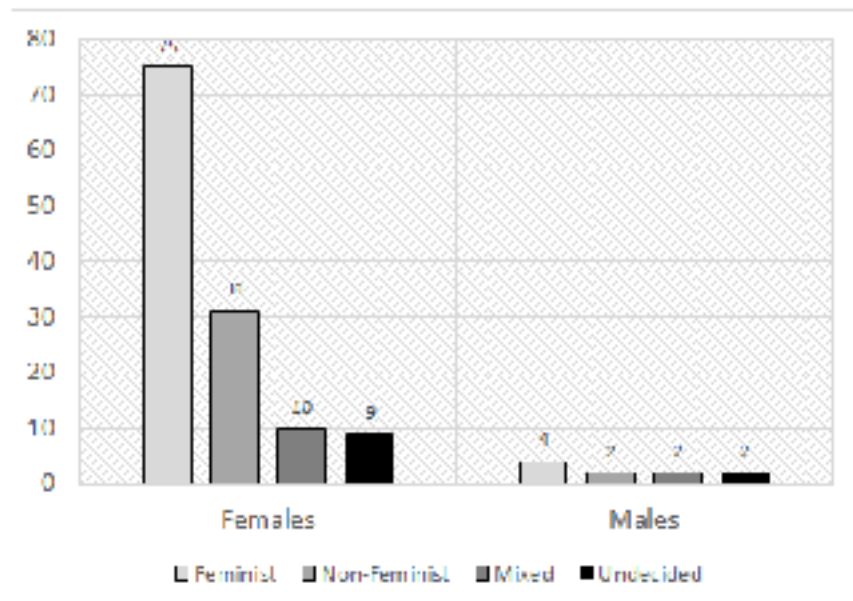
In addition to common themes that emerged from my research, there were also several correlations and conclusions that can be drawn, that directly relate to my initial research questions. These correlations and conclusions will be discussed here.

The initial inference that results from analyzing the data is that, despite a massively uneven number of men versus women who participated in the survey, the spread of individuals that do or do not consider themselves a feminist varied far more widely within the female population than it did within the male. The number of male participants that considered themselves feminists was roughly equal with those that 'sort of' considered themselves one, and with those that did not. Whereas within the female population, the divide was far wider, with a jump of over 40 more women associating with self-identifying as a feminist than those that 'sort of' identified as one.

It's also important to note that the spread of ages of the participants was almost equal for each 'section' of millennials surveyed. There was almost exactly an equal amount of participants that were 18-20, 21-23, 24-26 and 27-29. This gives us a more accurate sample population from which to draw conclusions from, because all ages of millennials, by the definition stated, are represented equally. While there is still a large divide between

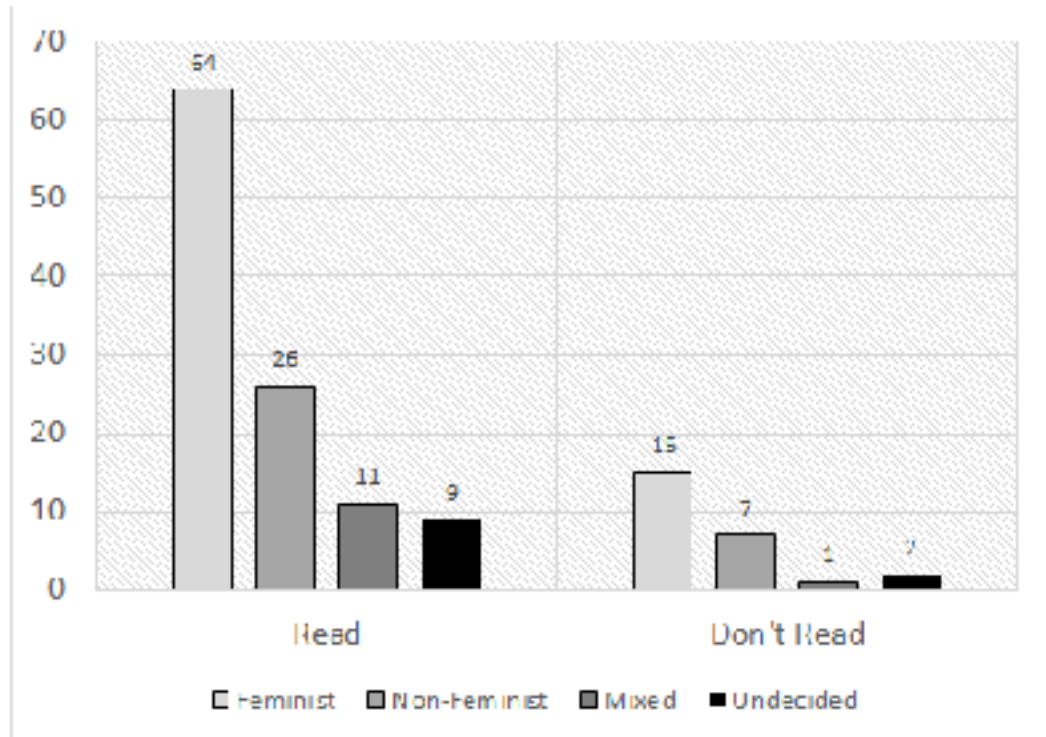
sexes, future research should draw from a larger sample population, and work to study male millennials as much as females.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about this due to the much smaller amount of male participants. It does leave room for future research and the conclusions that we can draw as a result of this begin to exhibit an interesting divide between the sexes in regards to opinions surrounding romance novels and feminism.



After analyzing the data, we can also easily determine how many respondents fit into several categories regarding their feelings about feminist ideals and romance novels. Those that do identify as feminists and consume romance novels, those individuals that do not identify as a feminist, but do read romance novels, and those respondents that have mixed feelings of association and do read them. There are also respondents that are self-declared feminists, and do not read romances, non-feminists that also do not read romances, and those with mixed feelings of association and also do not read romance novels.

By graphing this data, you can easily see at a glance the basis of my research— how many people find themselves in the crossover of both feminism and romance novels, as well as those that do not find themselves involved in either, and everyone who falls in a middle category within that. This is important because it easily shows how many participants overall do read romance novels, and within that population, are more considering themselves feminists or non-feminists? My research clearly shows that the largest category of participants, 64 individuals, do read romance novels and consider themselves feminists, further supporting the idea that these two concepts can successfully coexist for millennial consumers.



A final relation that can be concluded directly answers my proposed research question— can romance novels and feminist theory successfully coexist and embody one another, within millennial consumers? As the data shows, 57% of respondents felt that romance novels did embody feminist theory, while 31% felt they did in some ways. If we take that data a step further, we can analyze how many individuals feel romance novels embody feminist, and how that correlates to consumption of romance novels and their personal feelings toward feminist theory potentially conflicting with that consumption.

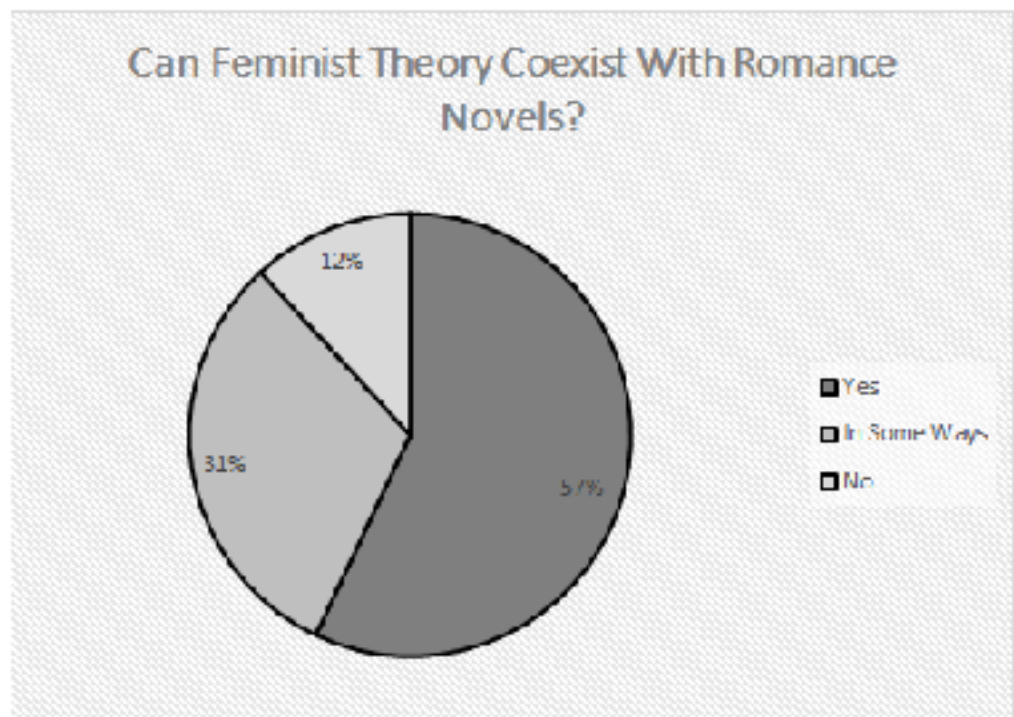
We can also see from the following graphs, that, within the group of respondents that said they do feel romance novels embody feminist ideas, two said they had conflicting feelings about

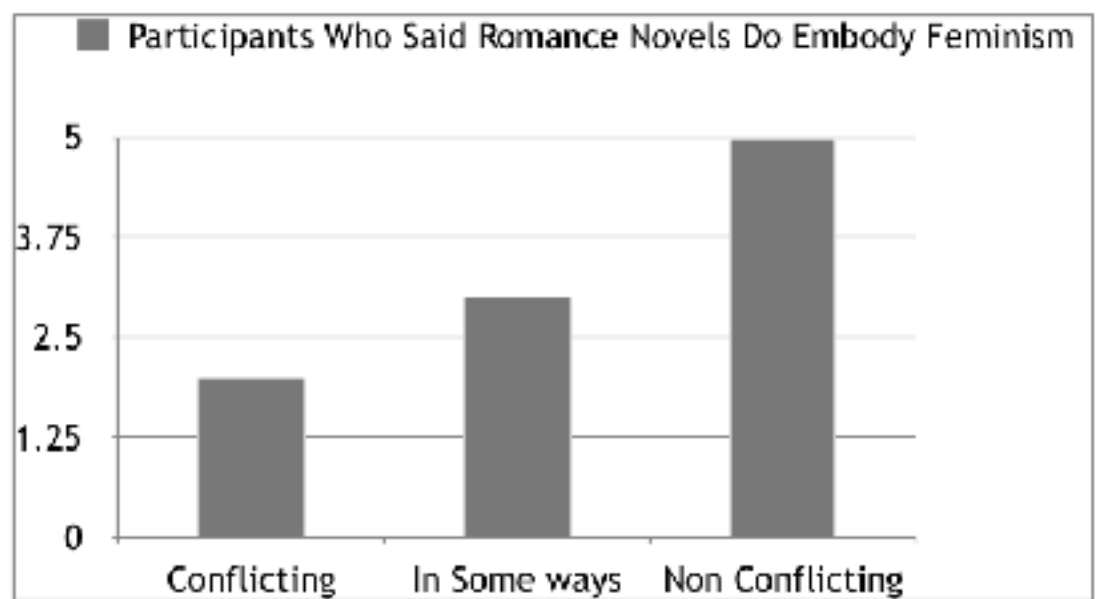
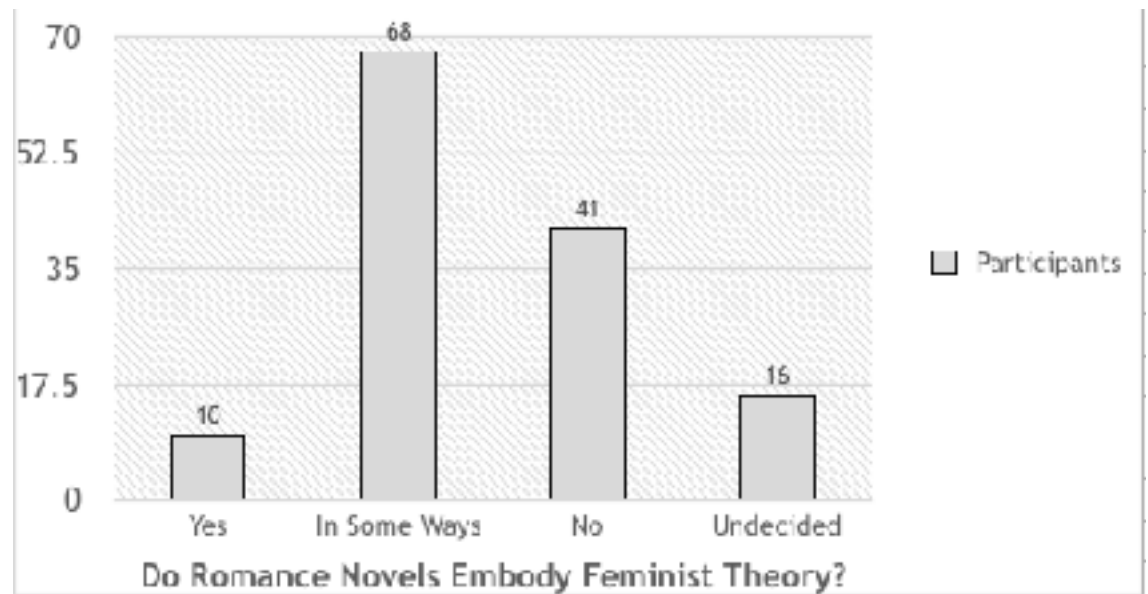
their personal consumption of romance novels, three had mixed feelings and five felt no conflicting from consuming romance novels and their personal feminist ideals. From the same population of 68 people that answered romance novels do embody feminism in some ways, seven individuals felt they did have conflicting between their personal feelings about feminism and their consumption of romance novels, 20 felt they had some conflicting, and 41 felt no conflicting between the two things. Of the 41 respondents that felt romance novels did not embody feminism, six also felt personal conflicting from consumption, 14 said 'in some ways' and 21 had no conflicting feelings. Within the final population of 16 people that were undecided about romance novels embodying feminism, one individual also felt personal conflict, five had mixed feelings and 10 felt no personal conflicting feelings.

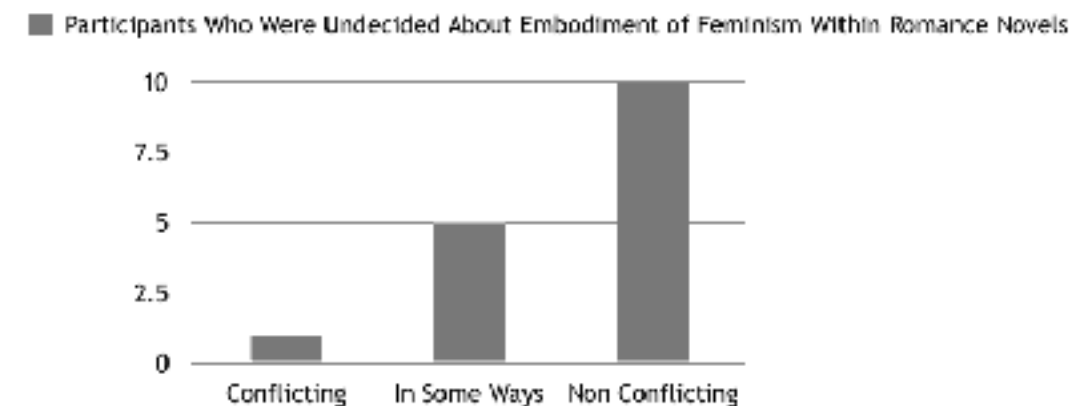
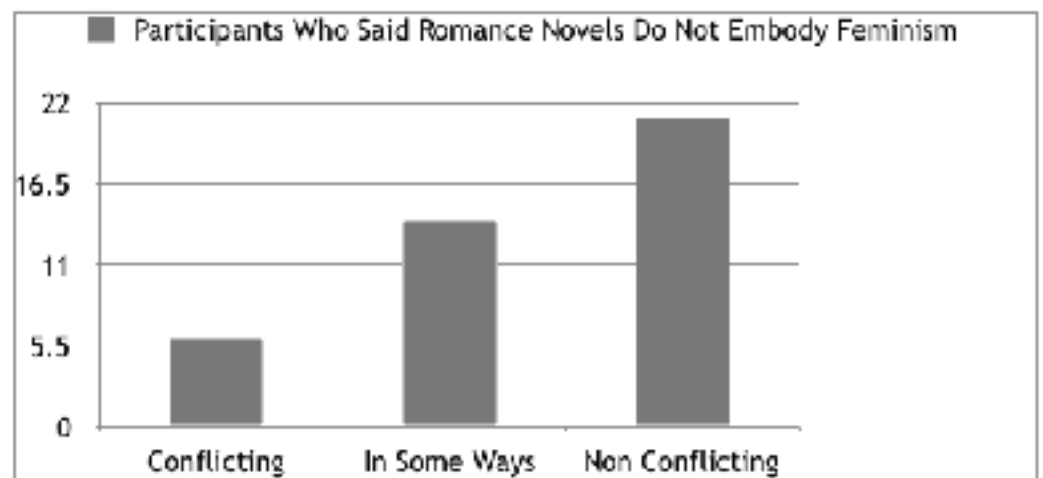
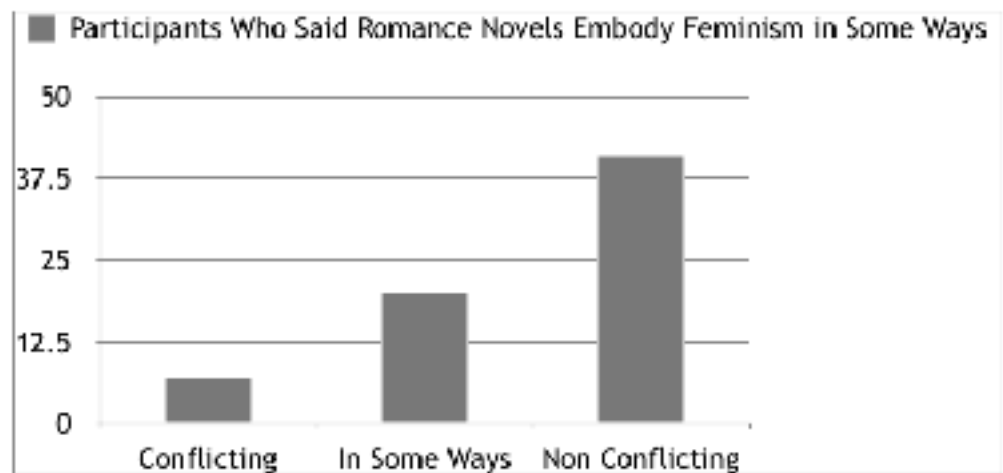
From all of these overlaps, we can confidently answer the research question presented— that the majority of people who consider themselves feminist feel that romance novels do embody feminism in some ways. This echoes the frequently mentioned 'situational sensitivity' that so many respondents incorporated into their responses, showing that most millennials feel there is not a black and white answer, but that it vastly depends on the content of the novels themselves, but most, in general, do embody feminist principles. In addition to agreeing with this claim, that population not

only does read romance novels, but feels no personal conflict between their consumption of romance novels and their personal feminist ideologies.

While the sample population studied is small in relation to the overall relevant population, one can only assume that a larger population sample would lead to the same conclusion ultimately—the most millennial feminists do read romance novels, and feel no feelings of shame or guilt commonly associated with the books by doing so. This correlation, and the resulting conclusions drawn, support my hypothesis.







Conclusion

This thesis has examined the existing research surrounding feminist ideologies and romance literature, as well as produced and analyzed original research on millennials from across the United States. This research was examined, and common themes and correlations discussed.

As a result of all of this research, both original and existing, it can be confidently determined that romance literature and feminist theory can, and do, correspond and coexist within millennial consumers. While there are some limitations to the research, including sample population size and variation of gender within respondents, the results show that the majority of millennial feminists do consume romance novels at least occasionally, and feel no conflict with their feminist ideologies in doing so. Future research could expand both sample population size and demographics, as well as dig deeper into ideologies. This could provide an even better understanding of how feminism is incorporated into people's lives in modern day society. By doing so, this could allow us to better embrace equality-focused ideologies within all aspects of society, making these ideologies the norm, rather than something deemed controversial.

My research has provided insight into a previously unexplored facet of the overall relevant population— millennial

consumers. Millennials consume media rapidly and enthusiastically, meaning that research into their cultural consumption preferences can lead to better understanding of society's ideological trends and inclinations.

With the consumption of romance novels holding steady, far leading the literary industry above any other genre, this literature cannot be ignored, specifically within millennial readers, the second largest consumer group (Romance Writers of America, 2015). Society also continues to see an increasing embrace of feminist ideologies, even if individuals are reluctant to put a label of 'feminist' on themselves. These two escalating pieces of our lives are especially prevalent for millennials, and since this age group is the generation that will ultimately come to lead in the near future, it's important we continue to study and understand what is popular, what is embraced, and how it impacts thought processes for these individuals.

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